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Islam and Social Justice

by
Fazlur Rahman

A big battle of words has been going on for some time in Pakistan between two camps, one calling itself "Islamic Socialism", the other naming itself simply "Islam", i.e. Islam, they feel, it ought to work in the economic sphere. From one point of view, the present struggle can be regarded as a welcome phenomenon in as much as it focuses attention on the real problems of economic life and represents a maturer stage of development than the cloudy discussions of Islamic Democracy and Islamic this and Islamic that. It must strike an observer odd, however, that after twenty-three years of declared constitutional attempts at an Islamic State, Pakistanis are not only no nearer any actual solution of the problems of economic justice, but should even have no clearer idea as to how Islam ties up with economic life at all. Whatever role outside agencies must surely be playing, internally speaking, the basic factor in the situation is that Islamists fear that the Socialists are actually inspired by Communistic ideologies and that they have attached the adjective "Islamic" as a purely hypocritical lip-service to the public attachment to Islam. The Socialists, on the other hand, fear that the rightists, by using the undifferentiated term "Islam", want to beguile the innocent public and deny them the long overdue economic justice, lurking behind not ideal Islam but rather historic Islam and its formulations and practices – much of it being as feudal and exploitative as the history of any other religion. They, therefore, tend to re-emphasize what they deem to be socialistic Islam rather than feudalistic and exploitative historic formulations of it. The rightists, because their Islam was so undifferentiated and contentless, and because of the public fury which erupted during the last months of Ayub Khan's regime demanding some effective form of economic justice, adopted the slogan of the nationalization of key industries and a very low ceiling of land-holding most probably as a tactical measure in order to draw the wind out of the leftists' sails.

The Socialists have made to-date no known worthwhile attempt to derive their ideology from any set of Islamic principles; but neither has Maudoodi, the rightist Islamist leader, made any tangible move to show how, to begin with, Islam was anti-Socialist and how, finally, the same anti-Socialist Islam could stomach an extremely low compulsory ceiling on land-holding and nationalization of the major part of industry. It is, after all, the same Maudoodi who had condemned Ayub Khan's projected land reforms as un-Islamic because they unjustifiably interfered with the rights of private ownership.

I think this is a fair and correct statement in a nutshell of the current situation. But if it is, the conclusion imposes itself that Islam is not playing any effective role in the formulation of the stands of mutually opposed camps. Indeed, these stands cannot be said to be formulated at all in any acceptable and reliable sense of the word. This is obviously and certainly not to deny that Islam has an influence and often very strong influence on the beliefs and actions of individual Pakistanis, providing motivations and patterns of conduct in the whole gamut of human activity. At the ideological level, however, there has been a complete failure to-date on the part of both the Islamic leadership and the government to provide any explicit Islamic orientation to the nation – the least in the economic field. The reasons for this hiatus between the repeatedly and insistently avowed aim and the actual performance are multiple but they boil down basically to three factors.

First, the received formulation of Islam which came to its full fruition in the Fourth Century of the Islamic era and which has ever since been regarded as being most uniquely and decisively Islamic, has proved to be a most formidable barrier to any change or fresh version of Islam. This classic interpretation of Islam is so fully equated with Islam that I do not know of any parallel in the history of any other religion. And yet, there is a definite period in history where the received interpretation of Islam settled down as Islam, as a system, almost burying underneath it the genuine personality of the Prophet Muhammad and his actual struggle. This system actually grew and evolved during the first three centuries of Islam through the hard and brilliant intellectual labour of the early generations of Muslims. Furthermore, the elements of its growth and evolution can be clearly discerned by the historic factors of political, social and economic motivation. Yet it appears to have taken the place, once and for all, of revealed Islam and Muhammad. This is the main reason why all reform movements ever since Wahhabism have basically failed to reform anything. And not only is the traditional Islamic scholar – the alim – unaware of this phenomenon and identifies Islam with this system, but equally the modern educated Muslim. This grip of the dead hand cannot be loosened unless a sound, historic approach to the study of Islam is cultivated, of which there are hardly any signs yet. And unless that is done, no question arises of any effective re-interpretation of Islam on a bound basis.

This is the reason why in this jungle the wood cannot be seen from the trees. This is the reason why in the late thirties' Maudoodi could announce that Islam requires every Muslim to surrender to the society all that he has beyond his needs as surplus, why again in the late fifties' he could condemn the land-reforms as thoroughly un-Islamic and why, finally (?) in the early seventies' he advocated a maximum land-holding of about fifty acres. This is the reason why Ihtishamul Haq Thanawi could openly denounce the legalization of bank interest in 1963 but in early 1970 received a loan of four hundred thousand rupees at an interest-rate of 7% from the Industrial Development Bank of Pakistan in order to set up a Towel factory.

Secondly, the force of conservative Islam – which is partly a fact and partly becomes inflated by sheer political maneuvering and exploitation – naturally functions as a powerful inhibition. Fearful of exciting the inevitable opposition to progressive thinking, both intellectuals and government leaders are forced into a kind of hypocricy and double talk which makes confusion worse confounded. There is an almost universal moral failure to face up to the issues in the very circles from which courage and leadership is normally to be expected. In this situation two answers are forthcoming which have the desirable effect of turning the face of failure and hypocricy into self-righteousness. For the government, there is, of course, always the pretext of law and order. In what sense are you an ideological government? You ask. The real facts about the governmental situation, one suspects are rather different. The government personnel, in their upper strata are largely modernized secularists who feel there is nothing at stake at all; for Pakistan, for them, is not really an ideological state. The middle and lower strata of the government machinery are largely derived from the middle classes who, although may be externally educated, are emotionally tied to conservative Islam and resent even a suggestion of any change.

The second line of defence, fashionable with intellectuals – not only in Pakistan but elsewhere as well – is a quasi-sacred character attached to what is usually called "the aspirations and feelings of the people" but from which inference is drawn that the conduct and attitudes of the masses is to be the norm of what is required or not required. This 'mystique of the people' is a lesson learnt from modern sociology but is very often abused to justify a state of lethargy and moral inertia as well as political malafide manipulation.

Thirdly, and even more importantly, even with the necessary will forthcoming, the intellectual task of relating moral imperatives of Islam to the economic problem is by no means an easy one. It has to be borne in mind that for centuries, Muslim society has been working and is still working on the basis of what I call "the minimal Islam" and "the negative Islam". The "minimal Islam" connotes that Islam essentially means the so-called "Five Pillars".

For the rest, Islam has largely meant and still means laissez faire and convenience and expediency. This secularism which has eaten deep into the Muslim society exists despite the nauseatingly repeated slogan "Islam is a complete code of life." The repugnancy clause enshrined in the two late Constitutions of Pakistan which states that "no law shall be enacted which is repugnant to Islam" authenticates not Islam but secularism.

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ISLAM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE (continued from 4)

Since the moral imperatives of the avowed ideology are not brought into touch with the collective life in general, let alone the economic field, economic development is seen as something autonomous and semi-automatic. Pure financial inputs, irrespective of the human quality and the moral orientation are supposed to work wonders and cut the Gordian knot of chronic poverty. Factories will **ipso facto** become industries.

Yet, eradication of poverty, hunger, disease and ignorance are moral problems **par excellence** involving the value system of a society to its core. In the present state of Pakistani society, reckless increase of population is social suicide and, therefore, a moral crime of the first order. And is not the long-standing disparity between the regions of Pakistan primarily a moral problem? But even this problem could achieve a measure of recognition only when it was forced to develop sharp and ominous political teeth either in the form of a Bhashani or that authentic Cinderella of the recent drama, Mujibur Rehman.

Political forms, whether in the shape of a military strongman rule or the daisy of parliamentary democracy, are both idle, when there is a fundamental failure of moral leadership. Gunnar Myrdal has brought home to us that unless people are required to do things, unless social attitudes are sufficiently modified, Five-Year Plans are doomed to remain more or less a fetish. It is with the creation of the necessary motivation among people, of securing their sufficient involvement that these plans should begin. For the creation of such moral climate is the sine qua non of progress – even economic progress. And is the effort too much to ask for even on the part of an ideological state? The exploitation of the profit motive is not denied but by itself it will create problems whether it solves any or not.

ACCUMULATION AND DISPENSING OF WEALTH

About the economic life proper, it should be recognized that the attitude of the Qur'an and the Prophet himself was definitely positive. Not only was the Prophet, like most of the Quraysh, a tradesman, but the Qur'an insists that the acquiring of wealth is a good thing. Time and again it points to wealth as "good **(khayr)**, as "the bounty of God **(fadl Allah)**" and asks Musilms "to spread out on the earth and seek the bounty of Allah". It exhorts them to expolit the resources of the earth and so on. Before distributive justice, therefore, wealth has to be earned and created. Indeed, distributive justice would be a meaningless term unless there is something to be distributed. But the Mecca of the Prophet's days had enough wealth and enjoyed enough prosperity, certainly by the standards of those days. The problem there was first, that some sectors of the community made money my means which led to oppression **(zulm)** like the system of **Riba** or gambling.

Secondly, this apparent prosperity and peace which the Qur'an points out conspicuously had a definite dark side to it, viz. that whereas there were highly rich people constituting the oligarchy of Mecca, there were also those who lived on the verge of starvation. The vehement passages which denounce those who are busy counting their money while there are those who cannot afford the necessities of life, rank among the most volcanic expressions of the early Suras of the Qur'an. Side by side with the denunciation of those who pray but are unheedful (of the meaning) of their progress, the Qur'an called upon the rich to pay out a portion of their wealth and told them that they had no right over their portion, even if they may have earned it. After this preaching and the creation of a social moral purpose, when the Prophet came to possess the necessary executive power, he instituted **zakat.**

for the glory of Islam ?

Curtesy: FORUM WEEKLY, Dacca.

Our legal text-books later distorted this institution and considered it only a pious act – like the saying of prayers – of giving charity to the poor. And following them, Western scholars also generally translate **zakat** as a "poor-tax" or "alms". For the Qur'an at least, it is a tax to be spent not only on the welfare of the poor, but on a multitude of other purposes like education, **Jihad**, on facilitating better communications and even "winning the opponents' hearts". How could such an institution, conceived in this comprehensive sense of dire realism, be mere charity? What other social purposes could the Prophet have in those days?

To us, the principle of **zakat** constitutes the principle of interference in private wealth in the larger interests of the community. It cannot be anything more or less. But this obviously does not mean and cannot mean that you take money from the rich and simply spill it over the unearning members of the community who are otherwise capable of earning. This would make nonsense of the whole purpose of this principle. According to the Qur'an itself, only those people were to benefit from it who were "weaklings". In the tribal situation of those days, this meant either disabled persons or real economic outcasts. For the rest, people have to be enabled to earn, they have to be made to earn. The statements of the Qur'an about earning and creating wealth can and should be given mandatory force. In other words, a commitment to a social revolution is necessary in the eyes of the Qur'an and what is required is a group of people socially so committed that they are able to infuse unto people a proper sense of endeavour and achievement. Failing this, the ominous threats of confiscation of all property will be the only form Islam will take: Maulana Bhashani's Islam will be the only alternative

ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE

Is this extreme form of social nemesis impossible in Islam? Contrary to the general assumption that, since Islam assumes that (a) people can earn and own wealth, and (b) there should be basic freedoms for the individual, it is against all forms of totalitarianism, this does not appear to be the case under all circumstances. We have seen that the supreme value in the Islamic social message is adequate social justice. When violation of this value occurs to the extent that these very individual freedoms become inoperative and dead, then the principles of social justice and interference in private wealth must take over. This is because the principle of interference has by its very nature a logic which knows only the limits of the demands of the situation. This is undoubtedly an extreme solution but then extreme solutions are required by extreme situations.

This line of argument also explains why some people think that Islam is inherently socialistic and they accuse medievalism of having distorted Islam; others claim that Islam if it is not feudal and capitalistic by its very

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PAKISTAN'S DEVELOPMENT (continued from page 8)

and while the masses are brought into close contact with the modern sector, the position of the masses does not appreciably change. Under such circumstances the resentment and tension which develops should be obvious. In Pakistan the differences between rural and urban areas and especially between regions are ways in which the class inequalities find political expression.

While the inequalities generated by Pakistan's growth process are of fundamental importance, there are other weaknesses which also have their source in the basic organization of the economy. Examples include the heavy dependence on foreign capital, the continued reliance upon primary products for foreign exchange earnings, and the continuing difficulties in agriculture. Each of these problems is endemic to a system which relies on class privilege.

The inequalities inherent in the process of capitalist development are a basis for political turmoil and thus constitute a threat to the continued expansion of the system. The actual manner in which the political disruption may be set off can vary. In Pakistan the immediate catalyst which precipitated the crisis was most likely the failure of the political system. Corruption had become so blatant that more and more segments of society began to view themselves as on the outside; and when oppositon to the regime became overt, masses joined in. Nonetheless, the more basic issue in the conflict was economic, i.e., the inequality, and any number of events could have sparked the crisis. (In roughly similar circumstances a crisis in Brazil was set off by a foreign exchange deficiency which put even more than the usual economic pressure on the masses.) Both political and economic disturbances are continually generated by capitalism, and, in the context of the inherent inequalities, any one can set off riots or rebellion.

IV

Perhaps the best way to illustrate and summarize the connection between capitalist growth and inequality is with reference to the new agricultural developments in Pakistan. During the past few years there has been much talk about the progress in agriculture being brought about by the introduction of new varieties of rice and wheat. The program is Pakistan's part of the international so-called "green revolution". In West Pakistan the program already is beginning to apppear successful in terms of expansion of wheat and rice output. The Problem arises, of course, over who will reap the benefits of the increased food grains surplus. Given the land tenure system, it would seem that the chief beneficiaries of the program will be landowners, especially large ones. Furthermore, as more and more agriculture enters the market economy, there is likely to be a consolidation of land holdings. Thus, these processes will lead to greater and greater inequalities within agriculture. Regardless, however, of whether or not inequalities actually increase, the poor peasants and agricultural workers will see a large increase in output which they are not receiving. In India such a situation has already led to bloody battles between agricultural workers and the landlord's hired "armies". Press coverage is so restricted in Pakistan that we cannot be sure what has happened there, but it would seem clear that the same problem exists.

These developments in agriculture not only exemplify the general problem of capitalist development in Pakistan, but may be an important source for altering the entire society. Peasants are often viewed as a conservative social force, but whether or not this is true in general, the new developments in Pakistan may make the situation very different there. With the introduction of capitalist farming to a traditional agricultural sector, the peasants are squeezed and transformed in such a way as to make them a potentially revolutionary class.

If and when the Pakistani peasants begin to move, they will not be alone. The unemployed and marginally employed urban masses, who are still close to their rural origins, as well as the relatively small class of industrial laborers, feel the pinch of capitalist development. Nonetheless, there is nothing inevitable about this action — neither its development nor its success is assured. Organization is necessary.

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constitution, it at least allows them and gets along quite well with them; while still others – the so-called contemporary Islamists in Pakistan – content that Islam is neither, but has inherently its own solutions to economic problems. The only trouble with this last group is that they are unable not only to spell out those solutions but are unable even to indicate their guide-lines whereby these solutions may be reached, and in practice they appear to be siding with the capitalists and big business.

Now, I submit that in a sense these contentions are correct and yet all of them are also false. Which of them is true will depend upon the situation we are faced with and how to tackle it. So far as the Prophet is concerned, his goal was to secure such measure of socio-economic justice as the limited wants of his society required. For the rest, he left businessmen and land-owners to themselves and encouraged them in their pursuits. When we come a little later to the legal formulations, we find contradictory stands, e.g. on the subject of feudalism, each of them supporting itself by a hadith from the Prophet. We are told, on the one hand, that the Prophet forbade the practice of being a sleeping land-lord and living on the sweat of the tiller's labour; on the other hand, that he allowed it. The former set of traditions abound, for example, in the work of Malik, an early Hejazi jurist, while the latter view was adopted by the Iraqi school of Abu Hanifa. Circumstantial evidence would show that the Prophet said neither of these things. For one thing, on an important matter of social policy, it is inconceivable either that the Prophet should have said contradictory things or that, if he had laid down one policy, it cold have been contradicted by someone else. For another, there were no feudal landlords in the Hejaz for there was no land there to permit feudalism.

This question, therefore, came to the fore at a time when the Arab Muslims conquered vast lands in Iraq and Egypt and actually became landlords. This process was opposed by those who wanted to hold fast to the pristine ethical standards of Islam; but the opposition was successfully countered by others, notably the Hanafi school in Iraq. This development was made possible by the pressure of the older Persian feudalistic practices combined with the fact that these practices could be accommodated in Islam since they did not appear to deny to the common man the requisite minimal standards. People did not starve, could have homes and, in fact, anybody who wished could get the available education. We, therefore, see that feudalism was, in a sense, a function of medieval Islam, but combined with the situational factors. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that there was a shift from the pristine practices of Islam where, according to credible reports, for example, a land-owner who did not cultivate his land without justifiable reason had to forfeit his land.

But very different is the case now. Not only have the standards of living vastly deteriorated because of population pressures, wants and expectations have also immensely increased. It is this radically changed situation that sets the terms of social justice today. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that, when other alternatives seem closed, the extreme left may not only take over but may take over with a double self-righteousness –restoring the rights of people and restoring them in the name of Islam. It would certainly not be the solution of the Prophet and the Qur'an. But nor was medieval feudalism. The way of Muhammad and the Qur'an would be to bring about a social revolution on a moral basis – to create common welfare by common endeavour for sharing fruits equitably.

This is a difficult task but by no means an impossible one. A genuine sense of social purpose and commitment can be created by a sincere and earnest change in the attitudes and orientation of all concerned – the industrailist, the trader, the government personnel, the teacher, the ulama and the worker. Basic principles and social objectives should be elicited from the Qur'an and an integrated social reconstruction program formulated. The equitable sharing of austerities and sacrifices must be undertaken and must appear to be undertaken. Differences in man's abilities and skills and their just requital is patently recognized by Islam but what Islam refuses to recognize is an unjust and inhuman disparity. The ulama, the Islamic leadership, must be restrained and their system of education brought in line with the general education and the requirements of the day.

But although this task is not impossible, it may alarmingly become so because time is an inevitable dimension in its achievement. Because of the time factor, difficult things do become impossible i.e. the passage of time ruthlessly eliminates alternatives. This task was much more possible and less difficult in 1947 than it is today. Tomorrow it may no longer remain possible.

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